Dale stood over their bruised and battered bodies and smiled. He didn't know if there was any good that would come of this, but they were dead all the same. And there'd be a lot more before he was finished. Nothing could stop him now.

The crowbar clanged on the concrete floor. It landed in a blood pool and spattered Dale's khakis. He palmed sweat from his brow—beating people to death took a surprising amount of energy, and he felt drained—and made his way to the '63 Impala, popping the trunk and grabbing a red gas can. He reached through the driver's side window and slapped an eight track in the radio. A medley of guitar and piano rang out as Bob Seger began to sing:

"Here comes old Rosey, she's looking mighty fine..."

Dale moseyed back to the warehouse, strutting a little dance along the way.

"Here comes the men, faces hidden from the light..."

He splashed the corpses with gasoline, in sync with the rhythm of the music, humming along. Strong vapors rose. It made Dale a little high…and a little sick. He was unexpectedly interrupted in his work when one of the corpses coughed and spat blood. Dale knelt beside the body.

"Still with me, Brett?" Dale mused. "Man, you tough sumbitch."

"*St-st-stop,*" begged the bloodied man. "*Please...*"

"Ahh, come on Brett. Don't be a punk at night and a pussy by day." Dale splashed him, purposely giving him a mouthful.

Brett sputtered and gasped, "*Stop!* God, please. Don't. Do. It*.*"

"Sorry, not sure I heard you right. Are you begging *me* for mercy?"

Dale splashed him again.

"*Please..."* Brett sobbed, "*Don't..."*

"Life sure does have its rewarding little ironies." Dale flicked his Zippo. "Don't it, Brett?"

Brett mumbled something that Dale didn't quite catch, and when it came down to it, didn't give a damn about anyway. Might've been

something along the lines of *I have nothing to do with it.* He waved the flame in front of what was left of Brett's face.

"Fuck you," Brett whispered in a final moment of defiance.

"You already did."

He dropped the Zippo and turned his back to the expanding heat. Brett's screams followed him as he went. He bent down and plucked the crowbar off the concrete floor, wincing at a spike of pain that drilled his lower back. Probably tweaked something during the fight; would feel worse come morning. Maybe he'd stop by Nurse's and get something for it.

Stepping outside into the gravel lot, the lower floor of the warehouse was a conflagration. The fire had spread, crept up, beginning to lick the windows. Black smoke billowed from the bay doors. Dale tossed the crowbar in the trunk of the Impala, slammed it shut, and slid behind the wheel. He threw it into first, kicked up a rooster tail of talus, and shot down the street, headed for the highway.

"With only one thing in common, they got the fire down below..."

#

Nurse lived in a ramshackle farmstead off Route 29 out by the junkyard. Dale passed acres and acres of stacked, pancaked cars before cutting a right onto an empty dirt road. A tall security fence hemmed him in on one side, the end of the junkyard; broken barbed wire fence on the other, what used to be a grazing pasture that had turned to weeds generations ago. City-owned land now.

Two miles further along and he cut the headlights, coasting the last couple hundred yards while he squinted into the gloom, trying not to veer off and head-on a pine. He pulled up slowly into what was Nurse's driveway, a sandy and rock-strewn square, half of which was occupied by a shitbox Omni hatchback.

Out of the car, up the rickety porch, empty Miller cans scattered around a plastic lawn chair and a cooler with an overflowing ashtray set on

its lid. Michael hammered on the screen door. When there was no response, he hammered again. Eventually a light flickered on.

“Who there?” asked a voice gruff with sleep.

Little pig little pig let me in, Dale thought.

“It’s Brett. Open the fuck up, man.”

The sound of a deadbolt sliding. “Brett, fuck you doing—“

As soon as the front door opened a crack Dale lashed out, steel boot slicing through the screen, kicking in the door. It caught Nurse in the face and rebounded back. Dale slid his hand in the way before the door had the chance to snick shut, and then pushed his way into the house, .44 Colt drawn.

“Brett—what?” holding his bleeding nose.

Dale clubbed him over the head with the butt of the revolver and the fat man crumpled to his knees. He was in a stained white tee and matching stained boxers. The farmstead stunk of smoke and sour, spilled beer.

“Remember me?” said Dale.

Nurse looked up, one hand tweezing his nostrils shut, the other holding his lacerated scalp. The eyes widened with recognition.

“Yeah, you remember me.”

Dale stalked around the room. Next to the front door’s jamb leaned a double-barrel shotgun. He broke the breech and pocketed the two loaded shells. There was a ratty sofa, a sticky coffee table littered with syringes, a recliner where the seat cushion had caught fire and melted, revealing the springs beneath. Someone must’ve nodded off with a lit cigarette.

“What you want?” quivered Nurse.

“First thing: got any vitamins? I’m not as young as I used to and think I mighta pulled my back.”

“Vi-vitamins?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I know you got ‘em.”

“In the bedroom. Coffee can.”

“Ain’t you the safety chief?” He motioned with the gun. “Well…lead the way.”

Nurse pulled his floppy-titted self to his feet—sweat already beginning to soak through his shirt—and staggered down the hall. Dale followed close behind. They came to a bedroom; floor carpeted with clothing, walls the yellow of nicotine from years of heavy smoke residue. In the corner was a beat-up dresser missing one leg and propped up with an old phonebook. On top of the dresser sat a rusty coffee can.

Dale reached into the coffee can and pulled out a Ziploc bag filled with yellow pills. He pulled out three, chewed them, grimacing at the bitter taste, and pocketed the rest.

“Reeks like a barnyard in here,” said Dale. “You shower these days? Got runnin’ water? Ain’t ‘nough Old Spice in the continental US to cover your stink.”

“I thought you were—“

“Dead?” Dale cut him off. “No…you know that it’s actually pretty hard to stab somebody to death. Gotta be persistent. Or lucky.”

“I’m sorry Dale. I didn’t know they were—“

“Save it, you fat fuck! My son wasn’t as lucky…This ain’t no social call.”

“Dale…”

Dale pistol whipped Nurse. Blood trickled from his temple. The fat man collapsed to one knee and looked down the bore of a .44.

“Where is she?” bellowed Dale.

“Who?”

Dale pistol whipped him again. Blood flicked off the barrel and beaded on the wall. Nurse’s already-damaged nose imploded.

“My junkie whore of a wife you fuckin’ slob, who *else*?”

“Jeewus! You bwoke my fwucking nothe.”

Dale dipped the gun and pulled the trigger, bullet shattering the fat man’s knee cap. Nurse screamed shrilly.

“I won’t ask you again. Where is she?”

“She took off with Tucker and the rest of them months ago!”

“Where did they go?”

“I… I don’t know.”

“Sure ‘bout that?” Dale leveled the revolver between the fat man’s eyes. “Bet your life?”

“I swear Dale. I don’t fucking know.”

“All right,” he said. “I believe you. Say hi to Brett for me.”

Dale pulled the trigger and Nurse’s brain doused the wall.

#

Moving on now. ’63 Impala straddling double-yellow lines. He ejected the eight track and slapped in a new one. Hendrix crooned to him about Joe and his gun.

Coming for you, darling wife, he thought as he gripped the steering wheel. Dried blood crusted the grooves of his knuckles. The dash glow illuminated his face in a sickly, ectoplasmic glow. His smile set dimples in his cheeks.

Tucker and his crew had skipped town a few years back, after a botched liquor store robbery had put their name on every cops’ shit list. Dale didn’t know where they went, but he knew someone that might.

Main Street was deserted at this hour, lonely traffic light blinking yellow. He pulled on to Kenmore and parked in front of the Salty Dog. A neon High Life sign was dead in the corner of one window. Honky-tonk music drifted out.

Dale walked in and scoped the place. Barflies rotted on stools, sipping pilsner glasses. A jukebox in the corner. Ceiling fan lazily rotating. Some dim booths in the rear, shadowed figures back there.

“Whiskey,” he ordered from the middle-aged bartender. Maybe she wasn’t that old, life had just been hard to her, and now she was working for tips to scrape by. There was a raised scar that started by the lobe of her ear and slashed down across her throat.

He swallowed his drink in one pull and ordered another. The pills were taking effect and his back felt loose. Limber. He shouldn’t have taken three of them, though. It was thirty milligrams, and he hadn’t taken any opiates since getting a tooth pulled several months back. He’d probably have to puke in a little bit.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Linda,” the bartended replied.

“Linda, you know a guy named Monroe? He used to work here.”

“Yeah.” Hand on her hip. “He’s my boyfriend. What you want him for?”

“Old friend. In town and thought I’d say hello. Name’s Brett.”

He held out his hand and she shook it. “Brett what?”

“Brett Palmer.”

“Okay, I’ll let him know you’re here.”

Monroe lived in a cramped apartment above the Salty Dog. Linda disappeared through a back door. Dale finished his drink, reached over the bar and lifted the bottle of Jameson, pouring himself another. His hand kept creeping to the gun stuck in his waistband, assuring himself it was still there.

A few minutes later the back door swung open, and here came Linda with Monroe at her heels. Monroe took one look at Dale and holstered his sidearm.

“I’ll be damned.” Monroe said, a smirk rose his lips. “Word through the grapevine was that you was dead.”

“Yeah… I’ve been getting that a lot lately.” Dale said dryly.

“You don’t look so happy to see me.”

“Heh, yeah, well you *did* fuck my wife.”

Linda gave Monroe a crass look, hand resting on her hip.

Monroe laughed, “Relax woman. That was a *long* time ago.”

Her hand dropped from her hip, but her glare was still very intent on her boyfriend.

“Don’t be a bitch now. Can’t you see I have business to attend to?” Monroe growled, “Go tend the fucking bar.”

Linda stood there for a moment, her face sank with her pride. Finally, she sighed and went back to work.

Monroe looked over Dale very carefully. His eyes focused on the hand Dale had behind his back.

“Well, you clearly got a beef bro. Whatcha packin’ there? Planning on gunning me down in broad daylight?”

Dale’s hand dropped to his side. .44 in his hand.

“The thought had crossed my mind.” Dale said.

Monroe smiled and shook his head.

“If it makes a fuck of a difference I was going to do the same thing to Brett.” Monroe said, “I thought it was strange he’d show his face here, instead I find you. Imagine my surprise.”

“He was surprised to see me too.”

“Paid ole Brett a visit did ya?” Monroe smiled, “How’s he doing?”

“He isn’t.”

“That’s a damn shame.” Monroe said, “Now are you gonna tell me why the fuck you’re here?”

“Tucker.”

Monroe poured himself a shot of rye and kicked it back.

“Tucker… Shit Dale, I know we got our issues. But, I did tell you to stay from that hillbilly faggot. *Didn’t I?”*

Rage rolled over Dale like an avalanche. He kicked over a table and its round surface spun about the floor like a top.

“Is that an ‘I told you so’?” Dale sneered, “My son… *Your* nephew is *dead* Holden! Just tell me where the fuck he is and I’ll be on my way.”

Holden Monroe took another shot of rye and buried his face in his palm.

“I don’t know where he is Dale. If I did, I’d have killed him myself.”

“Great.” Dale sneered, “Always there when I need you, aren’t ya bro?”

Dale holstered the .44 in his belt and turned towards the door.

“Hold the fuck on.” Holden said, “I *might* know someone who does.”

“The name is Bubba Lee.”

“Boboli? Like the pizza?”

“No, not like the fucking pizza you fucking idiot. It’s *Bubba* Lee. Like champagne.